Michael Knigin: Anatomy of a Master Artist-Lithographer

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The history of the American print boom that began with the Tamarind Lithography Workshop was anything but a smooth and amicable flow of events. There were unforeseen rocky rapids ahead that fragmented the Tamarind philosophy into a number of camps.

There are many tellings of the American Lithography Renaissance from different subjectivities and distances in time between the 1960s and the writing of the accounts. Following is a review of the Lithography Renaissance that plots Michael Knigin's trajectory within it.

In 1960, Lithuanian born printmaker Romas Viesulas was the first artist in residence at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. The following year he joined the staff of the Tyler School of Art of Temple University. This was Knigin's freshman year in which he innovated painting and ceramic styles that turned into "schools," as a number of students adopted the Knigin styles. In his sophomore year Knigin took his first course in printmaking and was more and more attracted to lithography. Viesulas and Arthur Flory, the head of the printmaking department, took keen interest in Knigin's development in lithography that matured to the point that Viesulas introduced him to the Tamarind Master Printer program. Knigin was accepted and began in September of 1964 – what would have been the first semester of his senior year.

Kenneth E. Tyler had entered Tamarind two years earlier and worked his way up diligently through the Tamarind Master Printer program and became head of the research department. By August of 1964 he had became technical director.

In October, when Knigin was only three weeks into the fifteen-month master printer-training program, the renowned Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo commenced a project at Tamarind.

A prelude to what was to come is best told in Ken Tyler's own words: "…The problem with Tamarind was also probably its strength – that it was essentially educational." And he continued:

> There was a mythical rulebook and that for me was the block that was difficult to get over. If you're programmed to believe that printmaking can be done only one way, that it has to go on a certain kind of paper and has to have a certain ritual that goes into making it, then you couldn't be farther away from the concept of making art. So the whole concept of someone coming and intuitively doing something and using a little bit of this and a little bit of that would not be acceptable in the Tamarind classroom." FN Goldman, Judith, *The Extended Image*, Abbyville Press, New York, 1987, p. 27.

And Tyler wasted little time in turning his words into actions. The Tamayo project began by following the "mythical rule book," which was not mythical rather the procedure for the Tamarind Master Printer Training Program – Rubbing crayon for the first of Tamayo's prints; *tusche* mixed with solvent and crayon for the second; *tusche* mixed with water and #3 pencil for the third image and so on. While the first prints received high grades in terms of lithographic excellence, they lacked the spontaneity and artistic invention that the Tamayo Parisian-made lithographs were famous for.

And then one day early in the project, the artist spotted a 40 X 30 inch lithographic stone propped up against the wall, the scratchy slate backing in plain view. “Can I draw on that?” Tamayo asked Tyler, and what followed is history. Besides standing on their own merits, *Organic Man* and its successive variations proved to be a portent of what was to come. While in successive years Tyler was to “overturn” all of Tamarind’s notions of the fine art print, in 1964 he and Tamayo turned over a stone and worked on its reverse side. While Tamarind expunged the Tamayo-Tyler episode from its records, the documentation sheets remained. *Organic Man’s* documentation reads, “Using sharp tools, the artist scraped into the slate backing of the stone; the slate was then rolled-up with transfer ink; the artist did more drawing on the stone and wiped areas with solvent-soaked cotton and rags. Next the image was printed onto transfer paper, which Tamayo proceeded to rework both adding and deleting. When he finished the fresh-ink image on paper was transferred to a freshly grained high-grade lithographic stone; more deletions and additions were made during the acidification cycle.” The project had come to life and Tamayo and Tyler produced twenty-six lithographic editions in two months – the majority were the stones for *Organic Man’s* reworked into black and white and color prints.

The ripples that Tyler and Tamayo caused soon became waves. One can imagine the atmosphere that ensued as June Wayne and Kenneth E. Tyler, the two headstrong champions of opposing print philosophies, locked horns.

Some printers and staff sided with Wayne and continued to work in the stifling academic manner while others sided with Tyler the hip rebel. Knigin who was equally headstrong as Tyler and Wayne took neither side. He could not and would not submit to all the squabbling nor to the one thing that Wayne and Tyler had in common – their cavalier attitude

towards others. In December of 1964, three months after he entered the Tamarind program, Knigin returned to Philadelphia.

In 1965, Ken Tyler, unable to cope any longer with the Tamarind *modus operendi,* left the Tamarind Lithography Workshop and set out to work on a single hand press in a rented space as Gemini Ltd. “I decided I didn’t want to become another educator who was a frustrated painter or another printmaker who was a frustrated painter. If I was going to become a printmaker I wanted to devote all my energies to it and I wanted to become the best.” FN Goldman, p. 28

The following year Tyler took on two business partners, Stan Grinstein and Sidney Felsen and Gemini Ltd. became Gemini G.E.L.. Seven years later Tyler left Gemini to his partners and founded Tyler Graphics in suburban New York and both companies thrived.

The Tamarind Lithography Workshop and Tamarind Institute must not be considered the same entity in a different city. The Tamarind Lithography Workshop’s goal was to train master printers to open printmaking workshops in different cities and work with artists who lived in close proximity. Tamarind Institute is primarily a teacher and artist-printer training center.

In summation, Tamarind Lithography Workshop and Gemini under Ken Tyler can be compared by simile: Tamarind was like a small orchestra of virtuosi playing on finely tuned instruments to a small audience in an acoustically perfect hall. Gemini was like a rock concert with all the state-of-the-art technological gear playing at full volume to a packed stadium.

Knigin received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Temple University in June 1966. Although his last year of art school showed that he had, indeed, learned a great deal in his short stay at Tamarind, he was expert enough to recognize that he was not a master printer and set out to further his technical knowledge by working as edition printer. In the fall of 1966 Knigin began printing editions at Irwin Hollander's workshop in New York and for the greater part of 1967 at Ernest de Soto's Collector's Press in San Francisco. Both Hollander and de Soto were certified Tamarind master printers.

In 1968 Knigin began teaching at Pratt Graphics Center in Manhattan and at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He found a loft on lower Broadway on the same block as Pratt Graphics Center and acquired a good lot of lithographic stones, and had a press built for him by Charles Brand (a few blocks away) and set up his own press.

In 1969, Knigin and a fellow Tyler-Philadelphia graduate, Roger Loft, purchased Chiron Press from its creator, artist Stephen (Steve) Poleskie. Poleskie is an exceptionally interesting character who, in addition to created Chiron Press in 1963 is a self-taught abstract artist and accomplished writer. Despite its brief five-year run, Chiron Press under Poleskie was responsible for a major shift in how artists used screen-printing in their creative processes. Screen-printing has risen from an industrial process to a Fine-art form. The sheer number of influential artists who made prints at Chiron Press reads like a who's-who of the 1960s art world, and many of those artists would go on to achieve art superstar status. The list includes, Robert Indiana, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Larry Rivers, James Rosenquist, Claes Oldenburg, Brice Marden (he was hired to work at Chiron), Louise Nevelson, Alfred Jensen, Marisol, Helen Frankenthaler, Elaine De Kooning, Nicholas Krushenick, and Richard Anuszkiewicz. Poleskie sold Chiron Press, in order to devote more time to his own artwork. In

1968, he moved to Ithaca, NY, and accepted a teaching position in the art department at Cornell University.

Under Knigin and Loft, Chiron Press became the first combination lithography and silkscreen workshop in the United States. The roster of artists they collaborated with includes Victor Vaserely, James Brooks, Jules Olitski, Wayne Thiebaud, Wolf Kahn, Paul Jenkins, Philip Pearlstein, Ilya Bolotowsky, Paul Cadmus, Brice Mardin and Walasse Ting. Through his ever-growing knowledge of lithography and not a Tamarind sheepskin Michael Knigin was now a master printer on any grading system.

While they enjoyed several years of success printing for other artists, both Knigin and Loft were fully aware that they wanted to dedicate their full time to their own painting and printmaking.

Knigin never had direct association with Gemini; however he considered Robert Rauschenberg – who skillfully merged stone lithography and photo collage at Gemini and later Tyler Graphics – one of the two major influences on his work. The other was Paul Jenkins. While involved with Chiron Press, Knigin developed a close personal and professional relationship with Jenkins the abstract expressionist who called himself an abstract phenomenalist. In Knigin's later paintings and prints the Jenkins influence can often be seen. Knigin's backgrounds are not just fill-ins but abstract phenomenalist paintings in themselves that add harmony or counterpoint to the forefront photorealistic imagery.

During the Chiron period, Knigin also co-authored with artist Murray Zimilies, *The Technique of Fine-Art Lithography*. Published in 1970 (with a revised edition in 1977) this book was one of the first updated textbooks for students of fine-art lithography.

In June of 1971, Knigin's art school companion, Andrew Vlady, had returned to the east coast after working for two years at Gemini G.E.L. under Ken Tyler and purchased Knigin's half of Chiron Press – the lithography half. He re-registered the company as Chiron Art and in June 1972 moved the press and stones to Mexico City where he re-named it Kyron Ediciones Gráficas Limitadas.

After selling Chiron, Knigin continued painting, teaching and making his own lithographs at the Pratt Graphics Center, and he and Murray Zimilies completed a second book that had allowed them to travel throughout Europe and the United States over the past years, *The Contemporary Lithographic Workshop Around the World,* 1974. This unique work lists 17 "lithographic workshops" in North America and another 20 throughout Europe.

In 1974 the Israel Museum and the Jerusalem Foundation invited Michael to Israel with the charge to establish the first professional lithography and silkscreen atelier in Israel – the Burston Graphic Centre.

Returning from Israel Michael became professor of printmaking at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He continued painting in his studio and began making prints on a regular basis at American Atelier in New York where he developed a long professional and personal relationship with technical director Mauro Giufreda. At the time Giufreda was becoming involved with a number of artists in the development of "The New Lithography." Mel Hunter, credited with being the progenitor of the new method, edited a joint statement by six artists including Knigin in 1977 titled *The New Lithography: The Mylar Method Manifesto.* In the Mylar Method the artist makes autographic drawings on translucent sheets of

acetate (Mylar was the trademark of one particular manufacturer of this material).

The New Lithography was controversial at the time for the mistaken yet wide-spread notion that it was a means of reproducing pre-existing works of art through photographic methods. In actuality photography was limited to one facet of the process – the phototechnical "transport" of the artist's autographic images drawn on translucent acetate onto photo-sensitized aluminum plates that were chemically treated to be ink-receptive printing elements. In traditional lithography, by comparison, the artist creates the autographic image directly on the stone or metal plate with greasy pencils, which in turn is transformed into an ink-receptive printing element through a chemical treatment called "etching" or "acidification". When the image is made directly on stone or metal plate, the printing element is the *perishable* printing matrix. When the image is made on Mylar® the printing element is not a matrix and is *replaceable* if the image is ruined.

Technically, lithography means drawing on stone. "Chemical Printing," is the generic term given to printing from a flat surface (planographic, planography) by Lithography's inventor Alois Senefelder. Both lithography and the Mylar Method are branches of chemical printing.

The use of photography in any form was condemned by June Wayne and the Tamarind Lithography workshop as well as fine Art Print competitions in the U.S. and Europe. Ken Tyler was employing photo transport printing elements almost at the outset of Gemini in the works of Joseph Albers and some of the prints of Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella. Tyler kept it secret while Hunter celebrated it openly. Suffice it to say that the first *Tamarind Book of Lithography Art and Technique, 1971* deals only with replaceable lithography from stone and metal plates

while the second Tamarind book published thirty-eight years later, *Tamarind Techniques for Fine Art Lithography*, 2009 includes all the phototechnical and replaceable printmaking processes and reduced information on the theory and execution of traditional (perishable) methods.

In the case of Knigin the painter-master printer, his repertoire of all planography techniques and processes was so vast and subtle that he used exactly – no more, no less – the methods that each and every image called for. His attraction to The Mylar Method was the practicality of printing a great number of colors in perfect registration; hand retouch each printing element and combine photo collage with autographic imagery. On many occasions Knigin hand illuminated his prints when the image called for painterly colors that were beyond the register of printed colors.

The advent of *Photoshop* was perfectly timed to Knigin's imaginative development. He took to computer image manipulation not for the virtue of creating images more quickly, rather to match in printmaking the continuously evolving complexities of his paintings. Knigin introduced digital printmaking to Pratt Institute, which became, under his tutelage, one of the major digital printmaking schools in the United States.